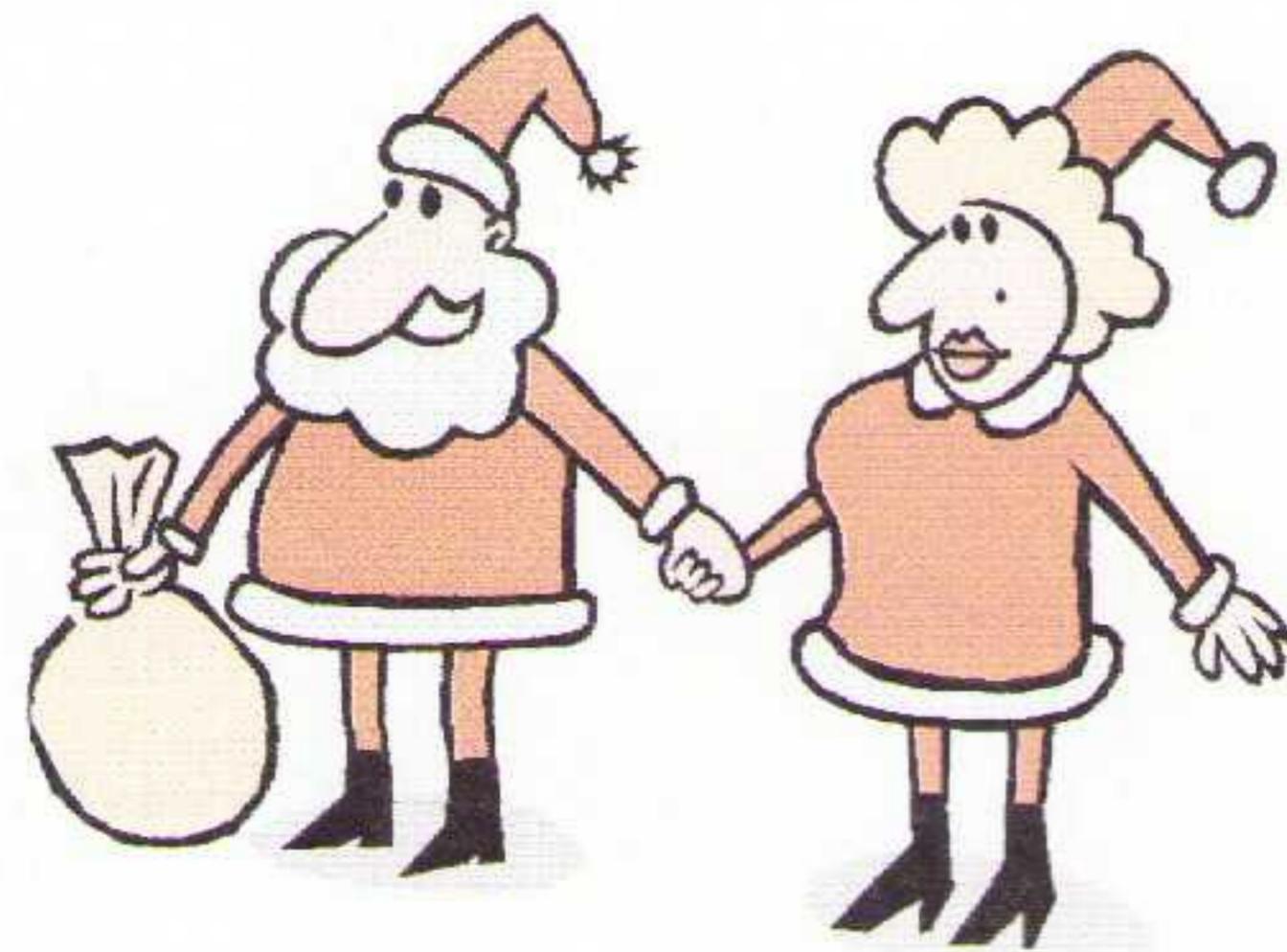


Christmas Memories and Traditions



of Elba AARP Members

December 2004

Santa always arrived early at our house on Christmas Eve

When our children, Dan and Nancy, were young, Wallace worked on holidays at the Post Office. Christmas was no exception.

On Christmas Eve afternoon, a relative would come get Dan and Nancy to carry them for a ride. When they returned home, Santa would have come while they were gone.

If Santa had come early Christmas morning, Wallace would not have been home to see them enjoy their new toys.



It took a few years before they caught on to our scheme. We continued to exchange gifts on Christmas Eve.

-by Lillian Taylor



Christmas 1958

The Christmas Santa was Almost Late!

Christmas 1962 was one of our most memorable Christmases. Our son was three years old and he had asked Santa for a pedal tractor, one like his grandpa's real tractor.

We found a pedal tractor in the Sears catalog and ordered it early in November. The middle of December came and still no tractor.

We looked elsewhere for a tractor but could not find one. We were very upset parents, because that was all our son had asked Santa for Christmas.

We bought him another present and we were trying to figure out what we were going to tell our son because he would not be getting a tractor.

Christmas Eve morning came and to our delight a big freight truck pulled into our driveway and they were delivering the pedal tractor

Needless to say we were relieved parents, and this proved to us that there really is a Santa Claus. The look on our son's face on Christmas morning meant so much to us.

by Betty R. Rogers





SPECIAL POEM FOR SENIOR CITIZENS!!

A row of bottles on my shelf
Caused me to analyze myself.
One yellow pill I have to pop
Goes to my heart so it won't stop.
A little white one that I take
Goes to my hands so they won't shake.
The blue ones that I use a lot
Tell me I'm happy when I'm not.
The purple pill goes to my brain
And tells me that I have no pain.
The capsules tell me not to wheeze
Or cough or choke or even sneeze.
The red ones, smallest of them all
Go to my blood so I won't fall.
The orange ones, very big and bright
Prevent my leg cramps in the night.
Such an array of brilliant pills
Helping to cure all kinds of ills.
But what I'd really like to know.....
Is what tells each one where to go!

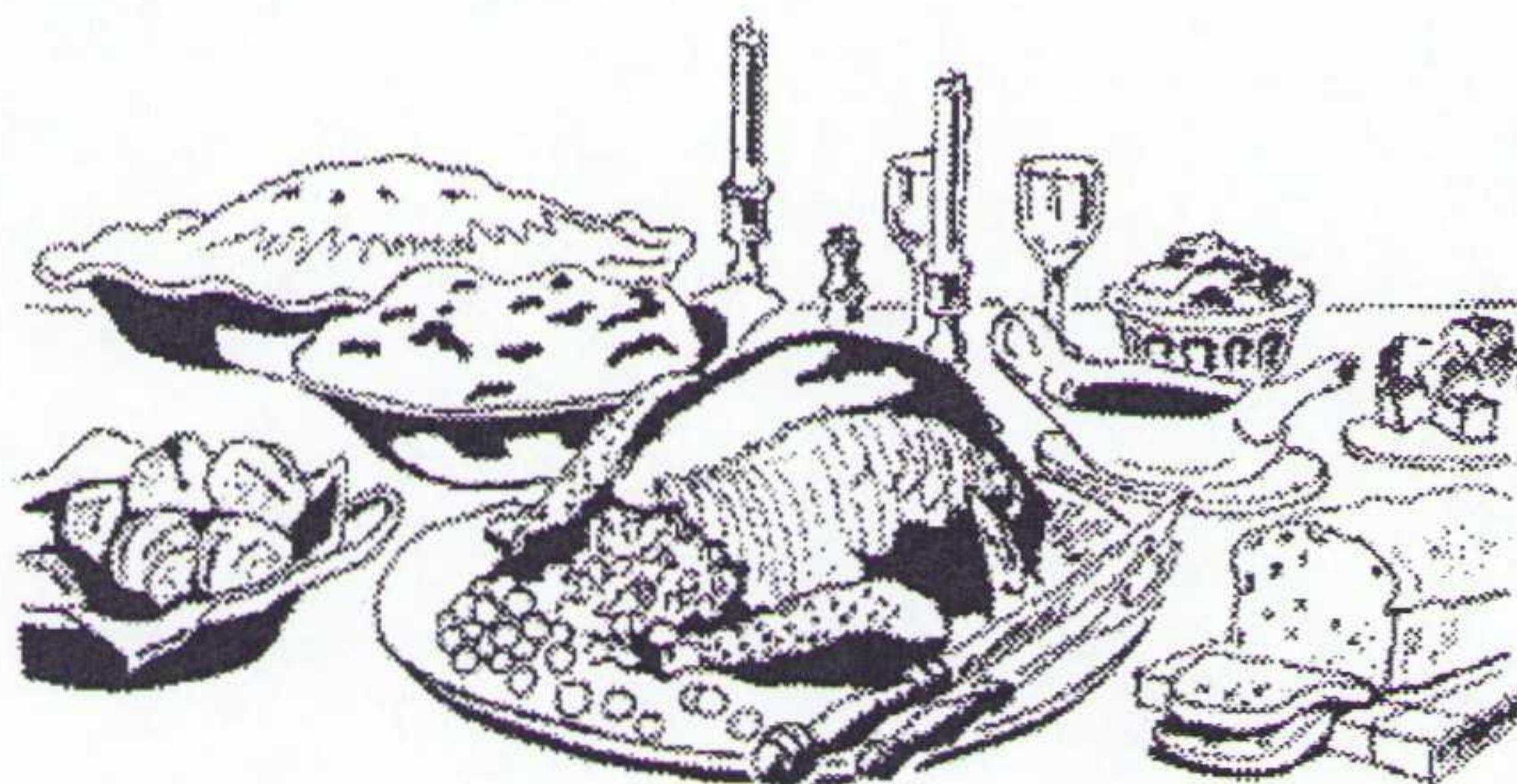
Christmas Eve Dinner Still a Tradition for Thompson Family

This Christmas tradition in my home is a "carry over" from when my parents were alive. We would gather at their house on Christmas Eve for turkey and all the trimmings.

After my parents passed away, my children were young adults, and only one was married. So we continued to carry on the Christmas Eve tradition of having a big turkey dinner, and are still doing this.

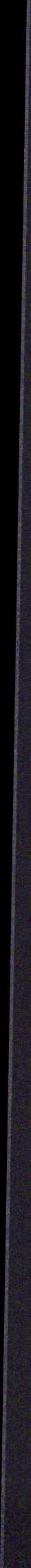
The children and grandchildren have their Christmas morning at home and I visit around.

by Elaine Thompson





*To
know
Him as
He is
today, not
as a manger
Babe, but as the
One Who lived and
died and lives
again, enthroned and
reigning in our hearts.
To sense the need of men who
only know the tinsel and the
rushing of the crowds, who
celebrate a day, and nothing more.
Because, to them, He slumbers yet at
Bethlehem! To love Him and His Word
above all else, and, loving,
wish to tell men everywhere the
tidings of redemption..this,
to
us
is Christmas*



"Yes, There Really Is a Santa Claus!" by Minnie Ruth Crook

As my mind goes back in time, I think of 1953. My husband was out of work and I was expecting our sixth child. It looked like there would be no Christmas at our home that year.

Then my husband and our children went into the woods and came back with a beautiful pine Christmas tree.

We cut red and green paper to make roping for the tree. Then we added some bows and beads. It was a beautiful tree.

As I sat thinking, I realized that there was something missing and it was my heart. The memories flooded back of my five beautiful children and I realized then that we were not poor at all. But we were rich indeed!

But something was wrong. My small children, ages three through six, were unhappy because they thought there was no Santa Claus since we would have nothing under our beautiful tree. Then word got around the neighborhood about our desperate situation. So, our wonderful neighbors got busy making sure that we would, in fact, have a great Christmas.



1955

Minnie Ruth Crook and family:
L-R- Randall, Sandra, Minnie Ruth,
Jerry, Mickey, Landis, and husband
Virgil Parker (deceased).

On Christmas Eve, my children and I heard bells ringing outside our door. Then someone knocked. It was Santa!

My three-year-old son looked up at Santa, his eyes wide open, and said, "Santa Cas!!" That was all he would say and then I knew in my heart that he believed. Needless to say there were lots of toys and goodies in Santa's bag!

If I had any doubts in the Spirit of Christmas, they were all gone on

Four days later, December 29th, 1953, my beautiful baby girl was born. As she looked around the room soon after arrival, she looked at me with those beautiful brown eyes and long black lashes and smiled at me! Then I knew for sure there was a Santa Claus and he still lives in our hearts in 2004!

Thank you, Dear God, for the pleasures and blessings my three sons and three daughters have brought to me throughout the years.



Here the 6 children are, all grown up!
Shirley Richards, Mickey Parker, Sandra Carroll,
Randall Parker, Jerry Parker, and Landis Walden



Shirley is missing from the family photo.

“Most Popular Gifts at the Martin’s House”

... by Olive Ray Martin

When our youngest child finally decided he was too old for Santa to visit, we continued hanging the long red hose on the fireplace mantle and added two more – for Shorty and me.



Shorty



Olive Ray



Terri

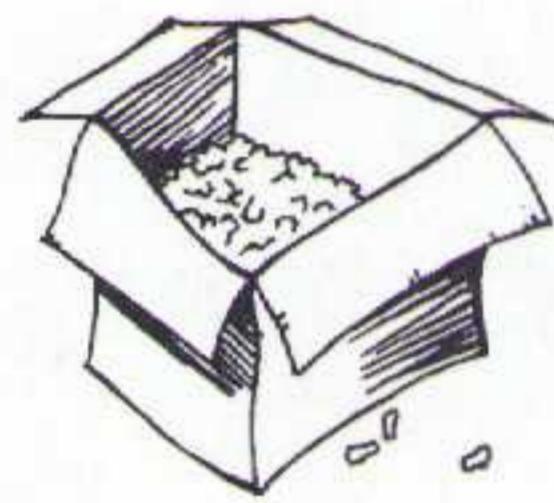


Ann

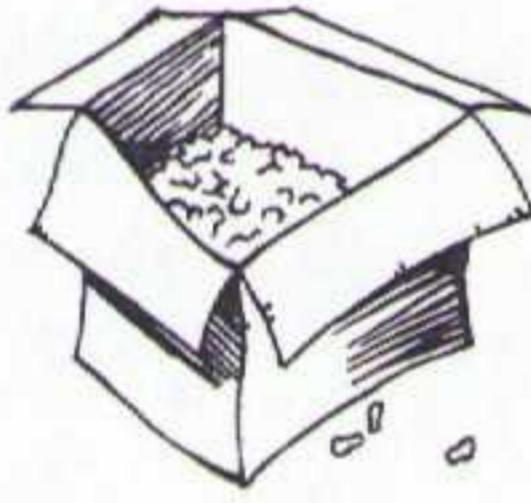


Will

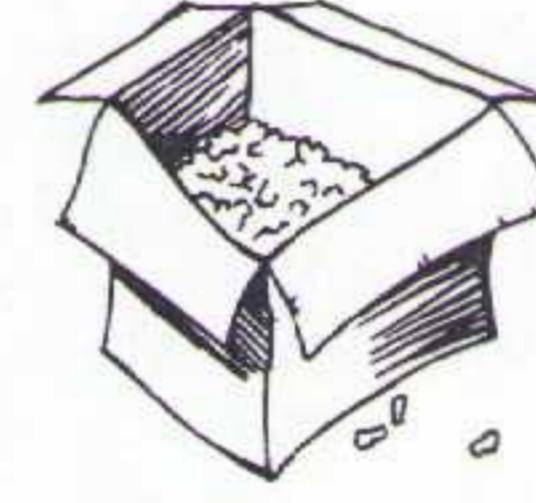
We placed five boxes on the hearth beneath the stockings – one each for the others to put their gag gifts.



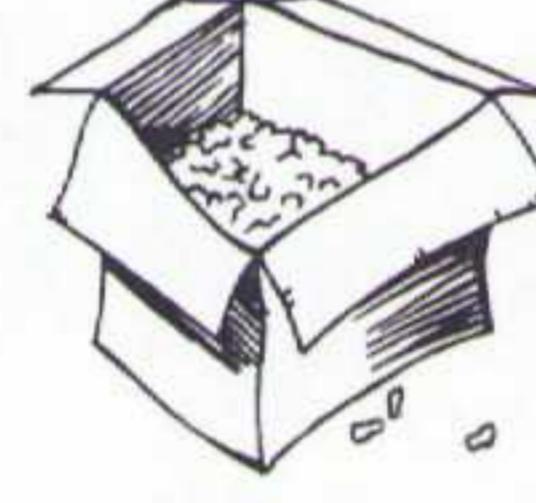
?



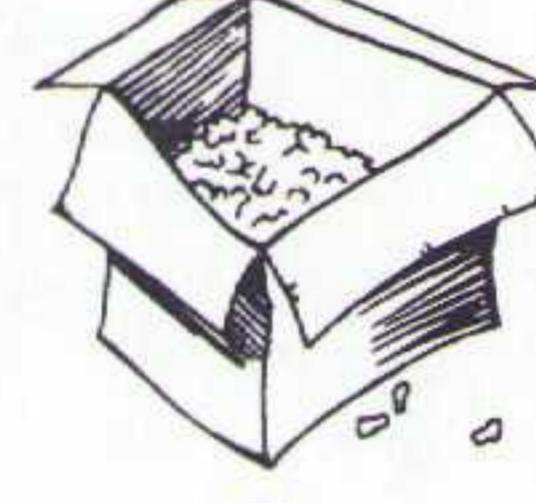
?



?



?



?

We really came up with some “doozies”! We kept them a secret from each other and had so much fun with them that we emptied the boxes before opening the gifts piled under the Christmas tree.

We continued this until we had in-laws joining us but finally gave it up because we ran dry on gag ideas.

It's a wonderful memory. I still recall some of our best gag gifts!

...

When Joe retired we decided to do some traveling. Our first stop was Costa Rica where we planned to spend 30 days.

Our 14-year-old son had been in a Christian boarding school. He did not want to travel and leave his friends. We took him anyway.

We arrived in Costa Rica just before the rainy season. The rainy season means you wake up to sunshine each morning and then by noon it begins to rain. The weather in Costa Rica is always in the 70's during the day and the 60's at night, even in the rainy season.

We entered Joey in the American School since he didn't speak Spanish, and he didn't want to learn. After 3 months of walking home in the rain from school, Joey (14) rebelled and said he didn't like Costa Rica and wanted to go back to his friends. After a difficult decision, Joe flew back to the U.S. and put him back in boarding school in Maryland.

Joe and I loved Costa Rica and we settled in, content with the decision we had made. I wasn't able to speak Spanish so I enrolled in the school for missionaries. We hired a maid, rented a town house, joined a country club and I was a full-time student.

I learned Spanish quickly with Joe as my built-in teacher. In 4 months I was able to participate in a Spanish Bible study. Almost all of our friends spoke both Spanish and English but it pleased them that I spoke their language.

One of our Costa Rican friends gave us a live coffee tree, planted in a large pot. Coffee trees stay small as a houseplant, about 3 feet. Coffee plants are great. They are always doing something. When ours arrived it had tiny white flowers, then the flowers dropped and green berries appeared.

Next the green berries turned red in December and suddenly it looked like a modern Christmas tree. It had decorated itself. Joe bought me a nativity set to set under the coffee tree. All Costa Ricans place nativity sets under their Christmas trees.



They don't believe in Santa Claus. Many of the nativity sets have been passed down from generation to generation. No gifts are under the tree. Gifts are exchanged 9 days after Christmas in remembrance of the Wise Men's visit who brought gifts to the Christ child.

Christmas is the gala time of the year in Costa Rica. There are parades, dancing in the streets, stalls selling everything from apples to toys, etc.

Joe bought me a Costa Rican cart that is hand painted, Costa Rican style. I still have it. It's my favorite Christmas gift and that Christmas was the best ever.



Costa Rican Cart

"Sandy" Christmas

by June Hamm

One of our most memorable Christmases was in the mid 1960's. My dad had closed the Elba Merchantile Store, which had a coin-operated horse out front.

Phil took the horse to a body shop for a paint job. The horse's name was "Sandy" and was painted like a palomino. The coin meter was removed and a switch was put under the edge of the saddle.

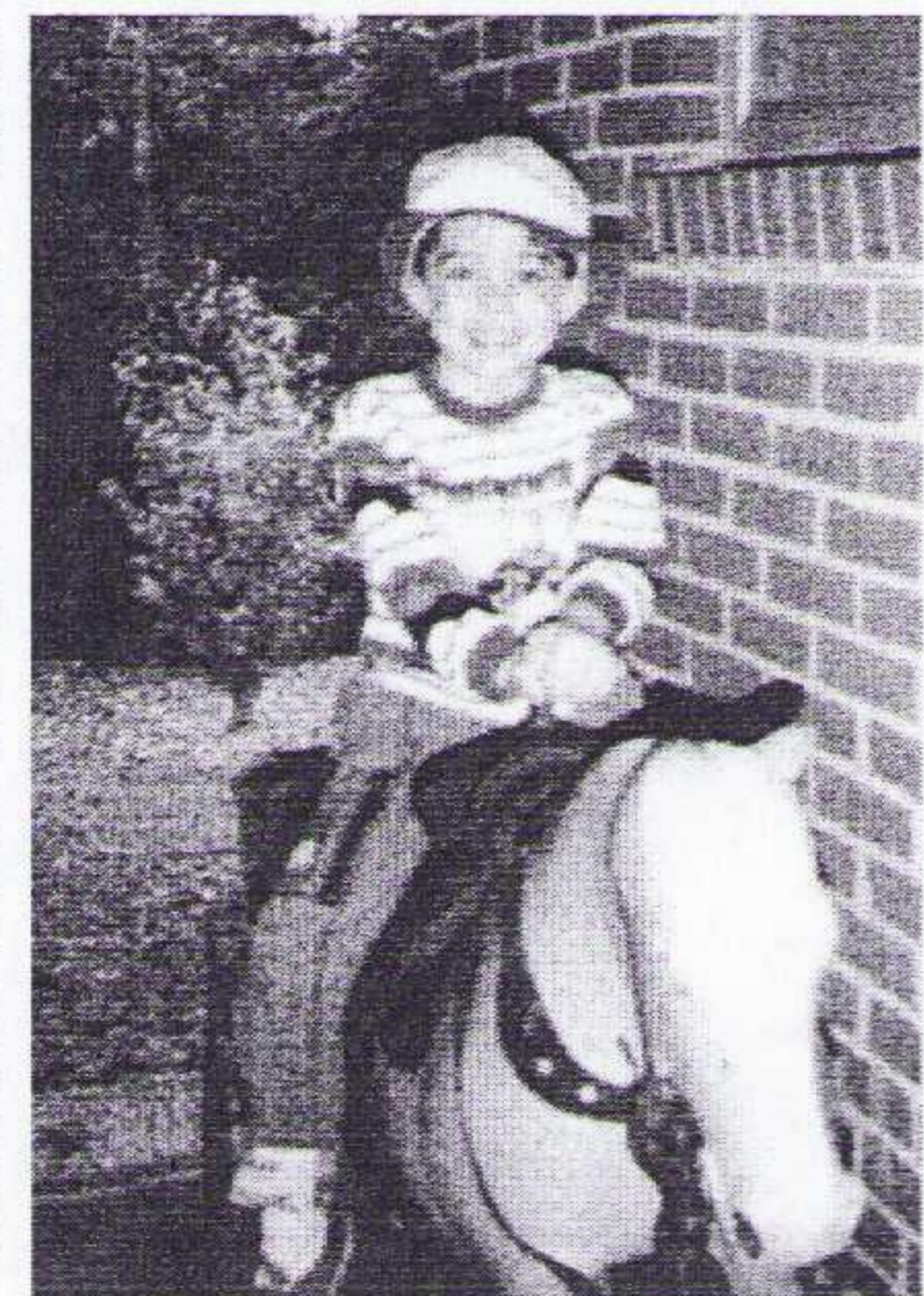
Santa brought "Sandy" to Rodney, Carl, and Mark for Christmas. They enjoyed him for many years.

Our five grandchildren have also enjoyed riding "Sandy". He was very "special"!



Carl, Mark and Rodney Hamm

Grandson Stephen riding Sandy



Granddaughter Sarah and Sandy





"NUTTY" CHRISTMAS

By Phillip Hamm

In 1985, our sons' wives, at our request, told us what to get them for Christmas.

After shopping Dothan and finding only one of the gifts requested, we decided to give them money. The gift we had purchased was returned for a refund.

We then purchased three ornamental nutcrackers and some walnuts. A friend helped me open several of the nuts, removed the insides, and replaced them with folding money. Then we super-glued them back together.

We put the nutcracker and one-third of the walnuts (some with money and some without) in 3 bags - one for each family.

They each had the most fun cracking the nuts and looking for money. The rest of the family just had fun watching them and listening to them laugh!



This photo was taken in 1985 at the wedding of Carl and Wanda.
Left to right: Charlotte (Rodney), Margaret (Mark), Wanda (Carl), Carl, Mark and Rodney

“It’s Fruitcake Weather!” *

by Alline C. Lee

My best memories of Christmas include all the cakes my mother, Tura Mae Carroll, and my auntie, Maudie Ray Lowery, would bake.

They would make fruit cakes, lane cakes, whipped cream cakes with pecans, and coconut cakes. They also made pies and cookies but I don’t remember much about those. I do remember that they made pecan pies.

What I remember best are the fruitcakes. November was fruitcake time. They would bake their fruitcakes and cover them with thin cotton cloth and soak them with homemade grape wine. Then they would place 3 or 4 delicious apples on top, and each day they would cover the fruitcake with more wine. The aroma of these fruitcakes baking was “heavenly”. All the wine kept the fruitcake from spoiling or molding. By Christmas the cakes were moist and yummy.

More about fruitcakes.... I remember all of these ladies who baked fruitcakes, using the same recipe. They were Tura Mae Carroll, Maudie Ray Lowery, Maddie Bee Green, Katherine Wilkins, Mildred Paul and Linnie Pearl Wilson. They would bake their cakes in a big dishpan and would put a glass in the middle of the cake to make sure it got done in the middle. When they all finished making their fruitcakes, they would meet at Uncle Rex Lowery’s country store and each one would weigh their fruitcake to see which one had the heaviest cake. They did this year after year!

When Donald and I lived in Arizona, I yearned for one of my mother’s fruitcakes. When she came to visit, she brought me one and held it on her lap on the airplane for the entire trip!

My mother’s fruit cake recipe

1 cup jelly (any flavor)	1 cup cooking oil
1 ½ cup brown sugar	4 eggs
3 cups plain flour	1 tsp baking powder
2 tsp cinnamon	1 tsp cloves
2 tsp allspice	1 cup wine (grape, blackberry, etc.)
1 tsp salt	1 ½ cups chopped candied cherries
1 cup raisins	1 cup chopped candied pineapple
1 cup fig preserves	3 cups nuts, chopped

Mix oil, sugar, and egg yolks and beat 2 minutes. Add spices, baking powder, salt, and jelly. Put flour in a pan and roll all of the candied fruit and raisins in it so it won’t stick together. Add nuts and roll in flour too. Chop figs. Add to the oil mixture a little at a time. Add wine, working it all together good. Then fold into stiff beaten egg whites. Put a glass in the middle of the pan and pour the batter around the glass, and bake in a very slow oven.

* From Truman Capote’s “A Christmas Memory”.

“Oh my,” she exclaims, her breath smoking the windowpane, “it’s fruitcake weather!”

Our Most Memorable Christmas

by Thelma and Q.P. Hudson

Christmas of 1966 was such a special time for us. Our first grandbaby was 23 months old. He was a New Year's baby. We were so excited to realize he was old enough for a tricycle. Of course it had to be Red!

We had idea. "Let's take him shopping to be sure we would get the right size."

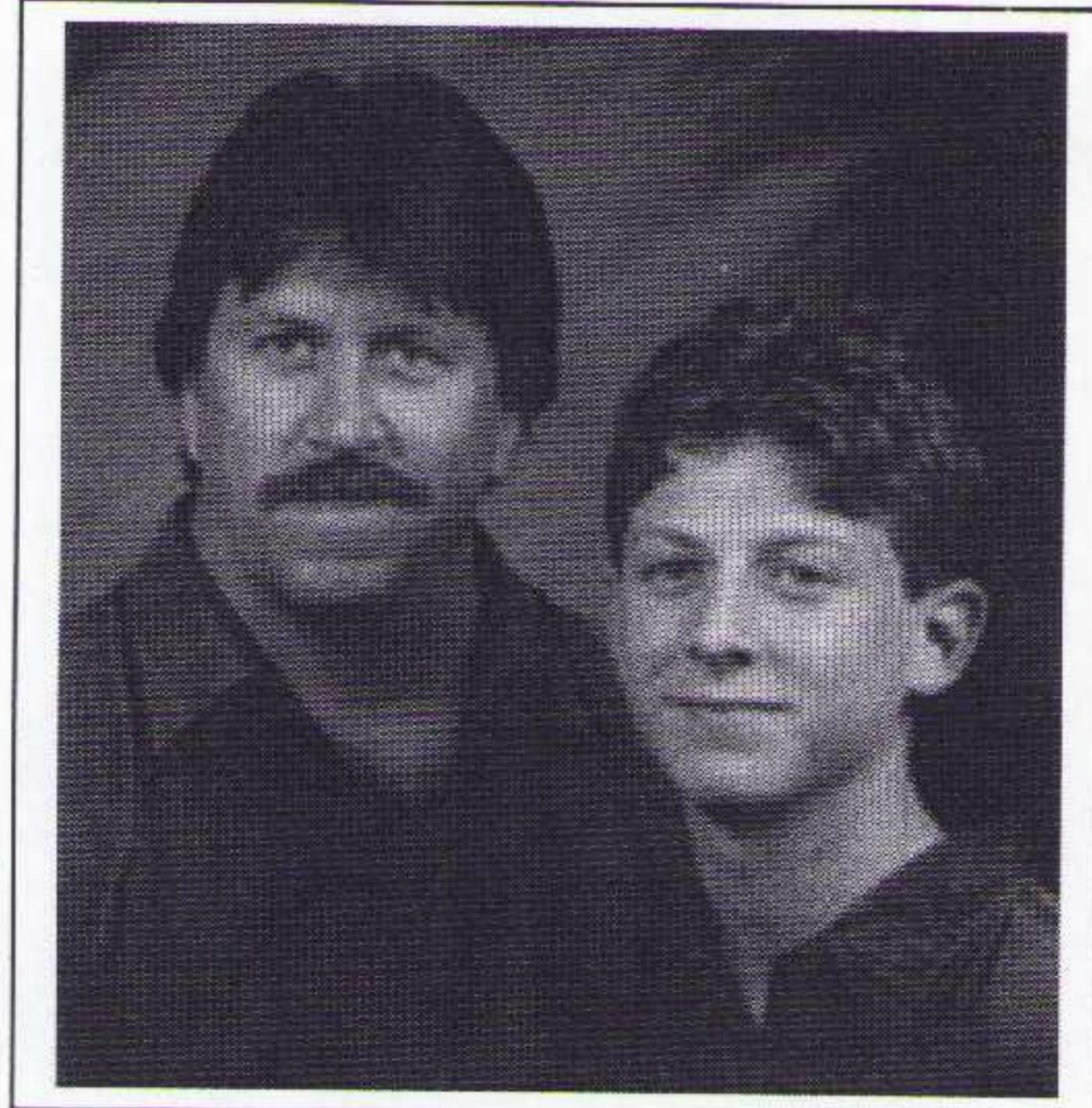
We stopped at the Western Auto store (a mistake for sure!). Sitting right in front of the door was this Red Tricycle - too large for him. Screaming with delight, he jumped on it, stretching his little arms to hold the handles and with his little feet not touching the pedals. We wanted to show him one smaller. But no! He wouldn't get off.

Finally after several tries, the employer helped PaPa get it in the car on the back seat—with the little boy still holding on, like he was glued to it, screaming and sweating – afraid of losing his tricycle.

We finally got him home and with the help of a neighbor we got him in the house. What a job for two frustrated, tired, sweaty, and beat-up grandparents. But it was truly worth it. We loved every minute and still today, after all these years, we think of this and laugh and think what a memorable and precious Christmas it was. This was the first but not the last of many beautiful Christmas seasons with our 6 grands and 13 great grands. *God Bless Them!*



Christmas 1966 - QP and Thelma Hudson with their 1st grandson Jack and his new red tricycle



Here is Jack, all grown up, and his son Kevin - (our great grandson).

THE BIG SECRET

One morning just before Christmas, when I was about 4 or 5 years old, my mother told my 10-year-old sister to take me out in the yard to play. My sister didn't want to go. She knew something was going on, but she finally agreed.

Once outside she told me she would tell me a secret if I would not tell anyone. I said, "Okay".

She told me why we were sent outside. It was because Mother was making me some doll clothes for Christmas. Well, this took the joy somewhat out of my Christmas morning surprise.

After all, where was my present from Jolly Old Santa Claus?

- by Felicia Revel



**'Give her a dolly that will laugh and cry,
One that will open and close her eyes.'**



**“Be hospitable one to another
without grumbling,
As each one has received a gift,
minister it to one another
As good stewards of the manifold
Grace of God.”**

- 1 Peter 4: 9-10

(Note: These words of wisdom are from Mr. Wilson Newman who has
celebrated over 90 Christmas seasons.)



**Merry Christmas
from
our house to yours!**

Wilson and Addieleen Newman

Christmas in October

In late October, our daughter Linda called us and asked, "Are you two ready for an early Christmas?"

"Oh, yes!" we replied. "Where?" "Hemlock Inn" she said.

Hemlock Inn is a lovely quaint place located in the mountains of NC near Bryson City. At this time of the year, the mountains are aglow. The fall colors are breath taking. The reason for going in October is because Hemlock Inn is closed the first of Nov. every year due to an early snow.

We packed our suitcases. Linda and her husband Gerald came for us on Sun. afternoon. The four of us left for Decatur the next morning. On Tuesday we were on our way to North Carolina.

Fall was in the air. The smoke from the chimneys on the drive up told us so. As we arrived at the inn, the Christmas tree twinkling lights and the yule logs burning were saying

Welcome and Greetings for an early Christmas! With all the excitement you could hardly hear the dinner bell ringing.

Two meals were served twice each day; breakfast at 6 and dinner at 5. What an assortment of delicious home-cooked food was ready for us. We were served as we were seated around round tables with a lazy Susan in the center of each of the 12 tables. The blessing is always asked. By the way, the inn keeper and family are United Methodists.

You never know who you might be seated next too. It could be your neighbor. You meet people from all over. What a delightful place to spend an early Christmas!

Our grands and great-grands were invited. They included: (Dr.) Troy and Tracy, Preston and Hannah from Dallas, TX; (Rev.) Kevin and Jennifer, Austin, Peyton, and Sarah Johanna from Springdale, Ark.; and, Ryan and Johanna & Stuart from Knoxville, TN.

Events were planned for all ages, including hiking, walking, river rafting, running, sightseeing, bicycle riding, reading, eating, sleeping and an early Christmas ride on the Christmas special which was a treat for the great grandchildren..

After these events, a photographer was waiting to surprise us in taking our Fourth Generation photo. With smiling faces, the job was pleasantly done.

The next morning, suitcases were packed and vehicles were loaded. Good-byes were said. The inn keeper was thanked for an early family Christmas get-together in the mountains of NC.

A week later we (the Crooks) arrived back home in Elba. We thanked our daughter and her husband, Dr. Gerald and Linda New, for their generous hospitable and memorable get-together at Hemlock Inn in North Carolina.

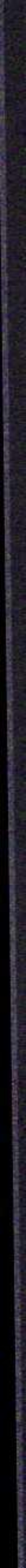
-Lloyd and Cupidean Crook



FOUR GENERATIONS
of the
Lloyd and Cupidean Crook Family

- October 2000 -

Bottom row: Austin Ellington and Preston New;
2nd row: Gerald and Linda New, Nanna and Papaw Crook (Cupidean and Lloyd), Peyton and S. Johanna Ellington;
Top row: Johanna and Ryan Simpson, Tracy, Troy and Hanna New, Kevin and Jennifer Ellington.



*Christmas Breakfast with Neighbors
--- A Tradition at our House*

by John Glen and Mary A. Lee

The year 1956 was a "special (and sad) Christmas" for our family.

That December our "Special Cousin" Rosa, who was also our neighbor, had come home from Troy State for the Christmas holidays. She came down to our house to exchange gifts with our daughter, Judy, who was 3-months-old at the time.

About 4 or 5 hours later we got heart-breaking news that Rosa Deal had been killed in a car wreck.

Every Christmas since Rosa's death, her parents - Uncle Harold and Aunt Dixie, would come eat Christmas breakfast with us as long as they were alive. Rosa was their only child.

Now we continue that tradition by inviting a neighbor who lives alone to come share Christmas breakfast with us every year.

Best wishes for a Happy and Loving Christmas 2004



Great Balls of Fire!!

by Syble Hahn

When I was a child, the week of Christmas, Daddy took us all to Opp to get special treats. We each had our favorites, and looked forward to them year after year. Daddy bought chocolate crème candy drops for Mama; oranges, apples, fresh coconuts, and suckers for the kids; peppermint sticks for Grandma, and raisins for him. We did not have these things any other time of the year, so buying them at Christmas made it special to me. I can still taste that fresh coconut juice!

Probably the most fun we had during the holidays was when my brother, Bill, and I would try to find Mama's hiding place for our gifts. As soon as she'd leave the house to go milk the cow, we'd start searching. After we'd find it, we'd take turns 'being the lookout' for her to come back in. One checking out the loot, and one on watch duty. The suspense was greater fun than the actual presents.

Do any of you remember those huge kerosene fireballs? I vaguely remember my dad and uncles lighting them while the rest of us lined up on the back porch to watch them go sailing through the field at the back of the house. What a site!!

Later years, we would get the sparklers that were lots of fun, too, and not as dangerous. Do the children ever burn sparklers today? Or shoot firecrackers or Roman candles? Fireworks on Christmas eve – how exciting!.

In my immediate family, we had Christmas Eve dinner and gift exchanges for the kids. Then on Christmas Day, we all gathered at my mother's for dinner with her whole family. When we left that afternoon, she presented each of us with a huge homemade ice-box fruit cake. I knew every Christmas what my gift from her would

be. But it was delicious, and I looked forward to receiving such a gift of love from her.



My family in 1966 – My 3 children: Joseph, Cynthia, and Debbie Moore, my parents: Lou and Becky King, and me, Syble Hahn

Nowadays, the whole family gathers around our table on Christmas day. That afternoon we play Dirty Santa or Scavenger Hunt (providing we can tear everyone away from the ballgames on TV).

Seems as if traditions have a way of following the generations.



Note: See article in back of this book about fireballs. You can also read about kerosene fireballs on the Alabama Folkways website: <http://www.arts.state.al.us/actc/articles/fireball.htm>

Our White Christmas

In August, 2000, my family decided we wanted to do something different for Christmas that year. We had gotten "bogged down" in a routine and wanted to get out of the routine.

We decided to rent a chalet in the mountains between Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg, TN. My granddaughter, Misty was 10 years old and had never seen snow (she lives in FL). So we made the reservations in Aug., hoping it would snow while we were there in Dec.

Christmas finally arrived after what seemed like an eternity. Paul and I cooked the Christmas meal before we left and carried it with us in an ice chest. We had smoked turkey, cornbread dressing, green peas, chicken and dumplings, sweet potato casserole, ice box fruitcake, rolls, and cranberry sauce. Yum! Yum!

We went on separate vehicles; Paul and I in our car, with our son, Larry, and his wife, Sandy, and their daughter, Misty, in their SUV.

Sure enough, when we arrived in Pigeon Forge, it had snowed. When we arrived at the chalet (actually a 3-story house with fireplace, hot tub on the porch, and a Jacuzzi in two bedrooms), icicles were hanging from the roof. There was enough snow accumulated on the back porch to make a snowman. We built a fire in the fireplace and it was so cozy!

Larry and Sandy chose the bedroom on the 2nd floor, Paul and I chose the bedroom on the 1st floor and Misty took the bedroom in the basement – which also served as a game room.

We were so excited we could hardly wait for Santa Claus to come. We knew he knew where we were!

While there, we went to Go Cart World and rode the carts around the track. Then we

By Edna Smart

went to Ober Gatlinburg, up to the ski slopes. It was so cold up there until the ski slopes were closed for the day, but they had an ice skating rink, and plenty of gift shops.

As a part of their Christmas present, we gave Larry and his family tickets to the Dixie Stampede show. This is where you eat with your fingers (no eating utensils). We had been there before, but this time they had a Special Christmas Show. We had lots of fun, and had our picture made as a family. The picture is still on my refrigerator as a reminder of our wonderful vacation.



The next day we went to Dollywood. It was so cold we almost froze. But we would slip into the buildings near the heaters to warm. The people thought the weather was fine. It was so cold the week before, they had to close Dollywood.

We were having so much fun little did we realize that before another Christmas, tragedy would strike twice in our family. Sandy's father died in June 2001 and Paul died December 19, 2001.

I am so thankful we had the opportunity to be together in a special place Christmas of 2000. I have fond memories that will last a lifetime.



I BELIEVE IN SANTA! DON'T YOU??

Santa will always be coming to our house and we must remember to leave cookies and milk for him. Our adult son James looks forward to Christmas with great anticipation. We insist he wait until the day after Thanksgiving to start playing Christmas music and practicing his near perfect Ho-Ho-Ho's. This is also when he starts wearing his collection of Santa sweatshirts, and Christmas ties every Sunday.

James was born on Dec. 8, 1956 and we realized very early that he was not normal. He didn't walk until he was 4 years old and speech came slowly for him. His older and younger brothers were kind to him and helped him during his early years. Things he said and did when he was young were funny, but as he grew older, they took on a different meaning and sometimes not so amusing.

Apart from his size, there aren't many ways that he functions as an adult. He reasons with the capabilities of a six-year-old, but communicates and has social skills of an adult.

When we realized that he had absorbed all of the education skills that he could, we started emphasizing social skills and teaching him "survival" skills. His memory is terrific—a living appointment book for us. He never forgets dental appointments, special events, etc. Also he never forgets names of people, a great bonus for us!

Back to Santa Claus... We have given up trying to convince him that He's too old for Santa. Even made him a Santa suit one year and when

he put it on and looked at himself in the mirror, he took the suit off and never put it on again. It frightened him. So, we just gave up and let him believe in Santa. He goes about singing carols (his favorite is Jingle Bells) and playing his Christmas records (prefers records to tapes and CD's).

Life is simple and uncomplicated for James. He is so trusting and loves everybody – almost. There are a few people he rejects - those who treat him different and talk down to him. He wants to be just like everybody else. As Christmas draws near, his anticipation is so great he can hardly sleep and is up before daylight every day, often checking to make sure there is space under the Christmas tree for Santa to leave his gifts.

James believes that you should always apologize when you are wrong, never wants anybody to argue, and if you promise him something, he never forgets that promise. He is always sincere.

James has always gone to church and a few years ago, wanted to join the church. Our Presbyterian minister questioned him about his sincerity and belief in God. The minister came away with tears in his eyes and said he had no doubt about James' simple faith and he was accepted as a member of the church.

When you ask James if he knows the true meaning of Christmas, he can relate the entire story about the birth of Jesus. He doesn't like the Easter story, especially when Jesus was crucified. His limited reasoning cannot handle that wrongdoing. James truly believes in Peace on Earth, Good Will to Men!

Life isn't easy living with a mentally handicapped son but we have been so blessed by his presence in our family (and often embarrassed). He has endured a lot of physical pain in his 48 years, but his limited knowledge of his problems helps him move on to better things. He treats everybody equal and is comforted by having his friends around.



James rides a van to Enterprise every day, 18 miles from home, to attend the Coffee Training Center. This is his life and where his friends are. He was learning to use a touch-screen computer at the center, which was stolen recently. He could not believe that someone would do such a terrible thing, and thinks they should be punished.

His favorite activities include playing basketball and break-time!

If he had enough money, he would buy a present for everybody in the world! He enjoys putting money in the Salvation Army kettles and donating to charities. He doesn't ask for much for himself but loves to help shop for presents to wrap for his 5 nieces and 2 brothers.

When you go to bed on Christmas Eve, think of James and how excited he must be. And if you hear him going Ho, Ho, Ho down the aisles of the grocery store, wish him a Merry Christmas, and he will reply "Merry Christmas to you, too," and he might ask you if you believe in Santa Claus!

- by Nell and Jim Gilmer

This article appeared in the Elba Clipper Christmas edition in 2001. It has been updated for this article. This photo was taken in 2003 in Greensboro, NC when his Uncle Bob and Aunt Susan took him to visit Santa.

HOLIDAY FIREBALL TRADITION REVISITED

by Anne Kimzey

A year ago Alabama Folkways featured a column by Doug Purcell describing the tradition of fireballing -- the practice of lighting kerosene-soaked balls of yarn or tightly-wound rags and tossing the fiery objects outdoors at night as a way of celebrating Christmas or the New Year.

The topic generated an outpouring of responses from readers who had participated in the tradition as children and recalled the excitement they felt watching the dazzling display of fireballs whooshing through the dark skies. One reader even drew a diagram of the field, placement of participants and path of the fireballs, and an illustration of the fireball bucket and the two people in charge of the fireballs and matches.

The responses greatly increased our knowledge of the tradition, particularly of how widespread it used to be. When the column appeared last year, Purcell told of an active fireball tradition in Barbour County. He also knew the practice once occurred in the Alabama counties of Henry, Houston, Dale and Russell and in Hancock County, Georgia. Our respondents indicated that fireballs have also flown through the skies of Chambers, Tallapoosa, Elmore, Bullock, Pike, Crenshaw, Geneva, Covington, Monroe, Dallas, Marengo, Perry, Bibb and Blount counties. While most respondents told of fireball memories dating back to the 1920s and '30s, Jeanette Gibson of Goodway in Monroe County, Alabama wrote that her family and friends began to gather on Christmas Eve a few years ago for "refreshments, fireworks, and fireballs," when she found it difficult to make the trip back to Blakely, Georgia, where her father's side of the family has thrown fireballs at Christmas for generations.

"On Christmas Eve our grandfather, George Edgar Bates, Sr., would have a place picked out in the back pasture usually where an old tree had fallen and needed to be burned. Our family (approximately 30) would gather around at dark and enjoy fireworks and throw fireballs," she wrote. "We would enjoy one another's company until past midnight and then hurry home before Santa got there."

The letters and phone calls revealed that fireball tossing was practiced in both white and black communities in Alabama. The origins are still a mystery. Those who were familiar with the tradition only among black communities speculated that the practice came from Africa.

Many white respondents emphasized their Scots-Irish ancestry and believed the game originated in Scotland. In fact, one caller alerted us to a radio advertisement for a car dealership in Mobile featuring a character with a Scottish accent talking about throwing the fireball to bring in the New Year. I called the dealership and the Scottish sales manager verified that he had spoken on the air about the ancient rite of throwing fireballs. He said, to his knowledge, it is not done in Scotland today, but he'd heard it was a custom that dated back to the "16th or 17th century." He had no idea that it was an Alabama tradition.

The radio provided another lead when a co-worker reported hearing a program on the Christmas memories of country music stars. She said Hank Williams, Jr. described throwing fireballs as a boy in Banks, Alabama.

Several readers wrote to explain that they made fireballs (also called "kerosene balls") as a homemade alternative to fireworks, which they were too poor to afford.

Instructions sent to us for making fireballs were all very similar, although only one person mentioned putting a rock in the center of the ball so that it could be thrown farther. Gladys Kitchens Foster of Lafayette wrote: "My Grandma would take men's Columbus knit socks which had holes in the toes and heels and unravel them, then rewind to make balls. She would sew them so they wouldn't unwind. At that time my uncle ran a small country store and he would put our balls in the kerosene tank a few weeks before Christmas for them to soak."

Mrs. Foster was one of several respondents who said she threw the balls "over the house top." Roy Ledbetter of Shorter wrote about a game called "Hail-E-Over," which he played in Tallapoosa County in the 1930s. First they made a softball-size ball from unraveled socks and soaked it in kerosene. "We would then light it and yell 'Hail-E-Over' and throw it over the house. The kids on the other side of the house were supposed to catch it before it hit the ground and throw it back over the house. The game was lost by the side that let it hit the ground first. (It had to be a tin roof because a shingle roof would burn.) This was our fire works on the 4th of July and Christmas."

Despite the dangers of playing with fire, the fireballers insisted they wore no gloves, although catching and throwing quickly or rubbing one's hands with dirt were mentioned as strategies for avoiding burns. Virginia Key of Troy wrote of growing up in Elmore County, "An Aunt of mine, probably about 12 years of age at the time, had a fireball stick to the back of her leg and she carried a bad scar from this accident." She went on to describe how the risks involved were part of the excitement of the game. "I watched terrified from our porch," she said. "My mother was so frightened of the 'game' that her terror was contagious, but it was an exciting sight to a 3 1/2 year old to see the ball of fire flying through the dark sky."

Mostly, respondents emphasized that fireball throwing was homemade fun in an era when you had to create your own entertainment. Many readers described other games that they played as children and other traditions associated with the holidays.

We welcome any information on these activities that you would like to share. Write to Alabama Folkways, c/o Alabama Center for Traditional Culture, 410 N. Hull St., Montgomery, AL 36104. The Alabama Center for Traditional Culture is a division of the Alabama State Council on the Arts.

Anne Kimzey is a folklorist with the Alabama Center for Traditional Culture.

**LOVING
and CARING
and SHARING**



That's what it's all about!